



REVIEW ARTICLE

INTERMEDIAL AESTHETICS AND ONTOLOGICAL PARADOX IN DEBASISH LAHIRI'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Highly appreciated for his "sumptuous and inventive language" (James Sutherland Smith), poet, critic and translator Debasish Lahiri from Lal Baba College, affiliated to the University of Calcutta, is the new type of international writer who builds bridges among cultures fusing traditions and inviting comparative readings, in the spirit of the new world literature theorized by David Damrosch or Homi Bhabha, who claim that no national literature evolves in isolation from the others. It is not the non-places of transnational space that stirred the ekphrastic imagination of poet Debasish Lahiri, however, but cultural landmarks from various parts of the world remediated in the manner of multimedial aesthetics and through generic experimentation. The ontogenesis of each poem resides in the actualization of a virtual structure of meaning lurking in the art object, the self-representation, in dramatic monologue, of a character in a picture, etc. Unlike traditional ekphrasis, Lahiri's poems in *A Certain Penance of Light* (Red River, 2025) break frontiers between the realms of physicality, subjectivity and the order of artifacts, creating a space of perpetual emergence of the contemplated objects into new possibilities of revelatory interpretation and reinscription.

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INTRODUCTION

Debasish Lahiri is one of the best known poets of our days, widely published and internationally acclaimed, especially for his original exercise in the ekphrastic genre and linguistic refinement. *A Penance of Light* (2025) is a book of poems related to works of art in various ways that most often depart from the traditional ekphrastic poetry. Sometimes a character in the picture delivers a dramatic monologue that breaks the frame of the picture to step into the real world and establish elective affinities with artists of the period or historical figures, with mythological or textual figures. The text may assert something that is contradicted by graphics forcing the puzzled reader into a hermeneutic exercise that demands erudition and familiarity with codes of representation. Competing structures of meaning, combined mythological frames complexify these poems that remind one of the baroque love of conceit and patterned control of multiple meanings.

Intermediality and meaning making: Hans-Georg Gadamer took an optimistic view of the hermeneutic "fusion of horizons" ensuring understanding among speakers through communality of language: "Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one

another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation." (Gadamer 1975, p. 371). Two revolutions have moved art theory and signifying practice away from postmodernist obsession with language and textuality: the rise of multimedia and the shift from analogue to digital image processing. The multimediated work of art, which we associate with the holism of the New Physics, has broken the non-transgressive pact between layers of reality. Each of the superimposed media – text, image, sound, colour – can tell a different story, and they usually do. There is no longer some "truth of the object" (Gadamer) embedded in language, because "verbal, visual, sonic, cinematic, digital, and interface-based channels inside a single narrative object" do not necessarily stand in a coordinated relation (Mayer, 2021, p. 35). Whereas, in an analog representation, words and images display features which are similar to their real referents, pixels are combined according to mathematical, statistical, or geometric algorithms. K.K.P. Kumar (2025) speaks of a new onto-aesthetics of code applied to artworks born at the intersection of art and technology with the real placed within brackets. This new aesthetics of digital media seems to be the true offspring of what Immanuel Kant called *Produktive Einbildungskraft* (productive imagination) in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and T.S. Coleridge, *secondary imagination* (*Biographia Literaria*): dissolving the object and recreating it anew out of pixels. Nevertheless, unlike Derrida, whose

allegation that there is nothing outside the text encouraged the philosopheme of a self-sufficient linguistic utopia, quantum epistemology sees everything in a state of emergence. The Deleuzian universe opens laterally, regressing from the territories of cultural patterns back into the chaotic flux of matter and energy, with artifacts and physical objects sharing the same ontological status.

Intermediality: conceptual framing: The rise of the new media and their combinations were seen from the first as a challenge to ontological continuity and epistemological coherence. Live reports on TV or social media are supposed to provide immediate access to the real event, but, at the same time, the framing of the reports on the screen through several open windows with the studio broadcaster providing comments on the event from TV guests, teletext about other breaking news, etc., creates a contradictory impression in the viewer through the cumulated effect of the invisibility of the medium (fourth wall removed, granting access), and its multiplication. The event is both narrated and visualized, the image and the text implying different logics: "one linear and temporal and the other spatial and spontaneous" (Dobson 2006, p. 8). Remediation – transposition into another medium – sparked new interrogation of the relationships between levels of representation within the same work of art or in intermediality (one sign system reading another). Postmodernity's legacy can best be identified in the "confusion in genre distinctions by following Borges' tendency to call an essay a story and, similarly, a story an essay— to establish connections between texts through the trope, or to try to fasten all the levels together, to form forms." (Wagner-Martin 2019, p. 13). Ekphrasis is the literary genre that may be said to be born out of an intertextual or intermedial encounter. It is the representation of a coded message, of another representation, a troping of another trope known in rhetoric as *metalepsis*. The passage from analog to digital media meant the loss of the referential real, fueling the sense of ontological uncertainty which, according to Brian McHale, distinguishes postmodernism from modernist investment in epistemology. Category distinctions among genres, which had served the correlation of media form and understanding, tend to disappear, genres and media being now freely mixed through procedures of producing texts and other artworks (McHale 2015, p. 21), opening like a fan of ontological possibilities. What used to be a rhetorical figure, the troping of a trope, is redefined in terms of ontological distinctions. Gerard Genette sees it as an encounter between an intradiegetic and an extradiegetic instance (author and character, author and reader, etc.): "the transition from one narrative level to another" (Genette 1980, p. 234). The tendency to deepen and complexify the ontological dimension grew in the next decades with Monika Fludernik (2003), Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), Julian Hanebeck (2017), to name only a few of the most referenced studies.

Ryan compares layered textual worlds to computer programs: "The notion of diegetic levels introduced by Gerard Genette to describe the phenomenon of the proliferation of stories within stories offers a narratological equivalent of the computer stack. Every fictional narrative involves at least two levels: a real-world level, on which an author communicates with a reader, and a primary fictional level, on which a narrator communicates with a narratee within an imaginary world. Whenever a narrative generates another narrative it adds another level to the narrative stack." (Ryan 2004, p. 439).

We consider that the layering is inside the semiotic complex – be it a poem, a painting, or a musical. The ontological difference is a matter of encoding, of convention. The intradiegetic, extradiegetic, metadiegetic worlds are textual in nature representing different levels of fictionality. Besides, not all narrative frames or embeddings are synonymous with *metalepsis* conceived of as laying in the abyss, a self-reflexive look into the mirror. By simply addressing directly the "dear reader" or "hypocrite lecteur", the author / narrator establishes an illocutionary relationship with the reader, which is not the trope of a trope, only a widespread convention. On the contrary, Browning's dramatic monologues abound in *metalepses*. In "Fra Lippo Lippi", for instance, the main action set in the historical world of fifteenth c. Florence – a patrol surprising a monk on his way from a brothel back to his monastery, who claims intimacy with Prince de Medici -, is laid in the abyss of his paintings: his figure at the bottom of the Madonna's portrait, or one of the guards suggesting to him Judas who betrayed Christ. Filippino Lippi produces, as a character, an ekphrasis of his own paintings, seen through the eyes of Browning the poet.

Ekphrasis may use other constitutive tropes, such as *prosopopeia* (see "Eurydice to Orpheus. A Picture by Leighton", by Robert Browning, where Eurydice, a character in the picture, is given a voice). As for "ontological reframing", "cognitive shift in perception" in the head of the reader (Agata Waszkiewicz 2024), or "event of understanding" (Hanebeck 2017, p. 121), such concepts fall outside the constituent frame of the art object pertaining rather to the psychology of perception. *Metalepsis*, initially confined to a chapter in rhetoric, has progressively entered into a rhetoric/ontological polarity which includes advances into cognitivism (the ontological break is not real but a mode of perception) or hermeneutics (it is for the reader to identify eventual ontological breaks), which is not theoretically coherent or elegant. One of the latest versions of the debate is the historicization of the trope, Jessica Merryll (2026) finding that narratology could be linked to the history of ideas, as the representation of levels of reality depends on the conceptions entertained by generations about spatiotemporal reality. From Heidegger ("Destruction", 1920) to New Historicism, this position was amply justified and supported. In our paper, we choose to remain inside the sphere of sign systems. *Metalepsis* may be the representation of a representation intradiegetically or breaking the boundary of levels of reality, assumed as constructed in the artifact. Ontological break may be found in artworks displaying an explicit poetics in this sense and allowing of an interaction across levels of reality, such as installations that interact with visitors, digital books whose epic trajectory is decided by the interacting reader etc.

Metalepsis as ontological paradox: From its earliest occurrence, conventionally identified as the description of Achilles' second shield in Book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*, *ekphrasis* resembled a glove turned inside out. Goddess Thetis wanted to protect her son, Achilles, above all mortals, so Hephaistos forged upon command a shield covered in images of the universe: heaven and earth, sun and moon, the godly smith distancing from the firmament in concentric circles to deploy a paradigm of human life with its dangers, work, celebrations - a cosmology fit for the compass of a divine mind. The outermost circle, however, is a symbol of repetition within limited space. Boys and girls go round in an endless dance of life but never able to transgress the shore encircled by the primordial Ocean.

Creation cannot reach beyond the Creator. Thetis understands the symbolism of the shield and is horrified. Her son carries with him a flaw, a heritage of mortality which will lead him to his doom. Can humans be granted immortality? The shield is the image of the universe and is being carried by an inhabitant of that universe, not as its lord, though, but as prisoner. Achilles' shield is not actually the description of a work of art but of its making as symbolic representation of an ontological paradox. Similar to the paradoxical relationships between St Mary and Jesus (*filia filii suis*) and, graphically, to the finite Möbius Strip with its infinite loop, is the ekphrastic treatment of a mythical picture in Debasish Lahiri's book of poems, *A Certain Penance of Light* (Red River, 2025). The picture (Fig. 1) portrays goddess Ganga with her last living boy leaving her husband, King Shantanu, who is running after them in desperate longing for his son. According to the *Mahabharata*, Ganga is the personification of the river Ganges, descended from the celestial realms to purify the souls of mortals. She had drowned her other seven sons in order to clear them from the sins of the world, but upon her husband's unwanted request, she spares the last one, whom she will years later return to him. The poet creates a dramatic monologue spoken by a child who washes clothes in the river, like his old father. He has a vision of a child longing for love, of a king running desperately to the shore against the setting sun of cosmic darkness. It is obviously a symbolic interpretation of the picture which aligns a scene of earthly mortals and its mythological prototype. The boy says his mother is a river too, as in Hindu mythology, the river, symbol of purification, bridges the worlds of mortals and divines. The bridge is provided by the troping of a trope: purification through washing. The mortal child has the vision of the mythological scene which is his mythical origin – again a loop, a glove turned inside out. The child narrative and the pictorial narrative fold onto one another, it includes the world in which it is included.



Fig. 1. 'Shantanu and Ganga' by Raja Ravi Varma, 1890

Metalepsis as intermedial signifying practice: It will not be enough to say that ekphrasis is an example of metalepsis – the

troping of a trope –, which may serve as a textual operation, a laying in the abyss; the Duke in Browning's "My Last Duchess", to take a classic example, draws his interlocutor's attention to the statue of Neptune taming a sea horse as an analogous representation of his own taming of his late wife. The frame of the poem is never broken, we are in a textual world all the time, and that happens because the poem is a dramatic monologue with incorporated speaker and silent interlocutor.

John Pier distinguishes between metalepsis and "pure" *mise en abyme*, but finds them similar: "Mise en abyme is founded on a relation of similarity between the embedded and embedding stories— 'simple,' 'infinite' or 'aporetic' reduplication or reflection [...]—rather than on transgression. Although both phenomena are dependent on levels, they must not be confused. Even so, there is a significant coincidence between the aporetic form ("fragment supposedly including the work in which it is included"; 51), or what Cohn ([2005] 2012) termed "pure *mise en abyme*," and metalepsis." (Pier 2014, p. 340). In intermedial ekphrasis, similarity means remediating the depicted object, its recreation in another medium. Instead of a Möbius Strip, the two artifacts serve as each other's reflection in the mirror. Andreas Mahler explores the complexity of remediation in his essay, "The Case is 'this': Metareference in Magritte and Ashbery" (Mahler 2009, 131). In Magritte's famous *La Trahison des images* (Fig. 2), language is used on the very literal level: *This is not a pipe* (but a picture). Self-conscious representation separates itself from object of representation.



Fig. 2. Rene Magritte: *La Trahison des images*

It was only natural that Magritte, with his magic-realist superposition of the real and unreal, should have appealed to the poet's imagination. The Hindu cult of light may be deemed behind Lahiri's poem based upon Magritte's *The Empire of Light* (1953), the poet weaving the picture into a textual correlative of mythical beginnings (Fig. 3). Magritte unifies in his picture three levels of reality embraced by light which lapses from unique mythical origin into channels of physicality: cosmic light, the artificial light of a street lamp, and light originating in neither source, spreading out from the windows of a house engulfed in darkness, like the inward light of its inhabitants. The moths drawn to the artificial light because it outdazzles the setting sun's light are an ironic comment on false appearances. The Indian parallel is quickened through reference to the divine light (the Sun God,

Surya, worshipped as Brahma in the morning, Shiva in the afternoon and Vishnu in the evening). Shiva stands for wounded cosmic force, its "wounded light" straining among the darkening streets. Vishnu, the god that brings back order, can be intuited in the "painter's eye" which seems to draw back into the dusky sky the light of the setting sun.

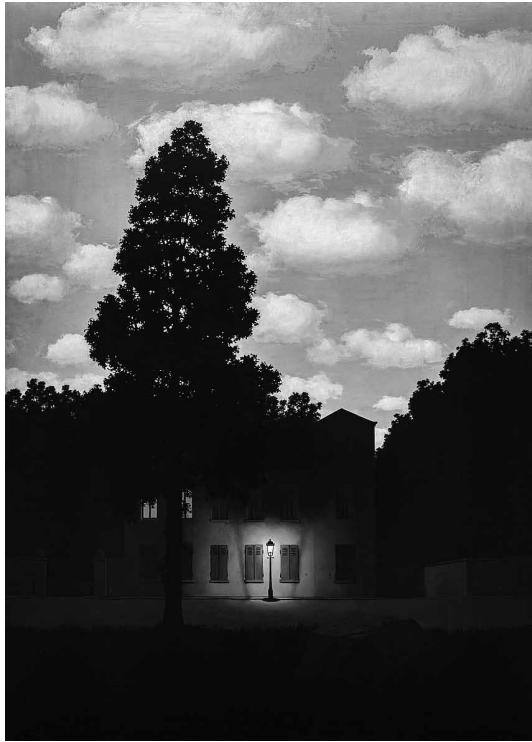


Fig. 3. *The Empire of Light* by René Magritte, 1953

"Morning Sleep" is based on another picture by Magritte, *The Victory* (1939) (Fig. 4), read in ontological key. The painting's title is ironic, as the door opens into nothingness or, rather, it lures the onlooker into some minor metamorphosis of the scene. Snow, water, cloud are states of the same substance – the physical world, reality is always *à sa place*, as Lacan says. No transcendence is possible in the realm of the unredeemable *aqua vitae* – the primordial element of the material universe. The poet is remediating the picture exchanging sound for colour in the parable. He imagines himself being awakened by the irritating, jarring sound of an opening door. The world of the romantic dreamer cannot bear so much reality. The boring sameness of Magritte's winter landscape is thus pitted against the meaningless and monotonous fricative sound generating words that name hypostases of metamorphic matter. The poet and the painter express the same abhorrence of the "unfriendly kin" of "sea/ sky/ sand" – the world perceived as an existentialist stranger, as absolute otherness.

Performative Ekphrasis: Playing with pictorial and linguistic material, the poet fuses text and image on the semantic level. In "Window" (Fig. 5), the reading of the picture is visually rendered. The image of an old man anticipating his death (thinking the room will not be completely empty because the noise of the street and of nocturnal birds will continue to fill it) is resumed in the negative (Fig. 5). The poet literalizes fiction, representing death in the two media. Parallelism is carried into various media: textual/ visual, natural sound/ speech sound, presence as negative of absence, etc. with consummate art of phrasing according to shades of meaning and rhythm:



Fig. 4. *'The Victory'* by René Magritte, 1939

the **dusk**song of cicada
an orchestra
with notes like pitchfork
or spade
try lifting the burden
of an **unspoken word**.

I think
memories of noise
shall fill the city air
and a nightjar shall sing
in my room.
There shall be **no vacuum**.

(*emphases mine*)

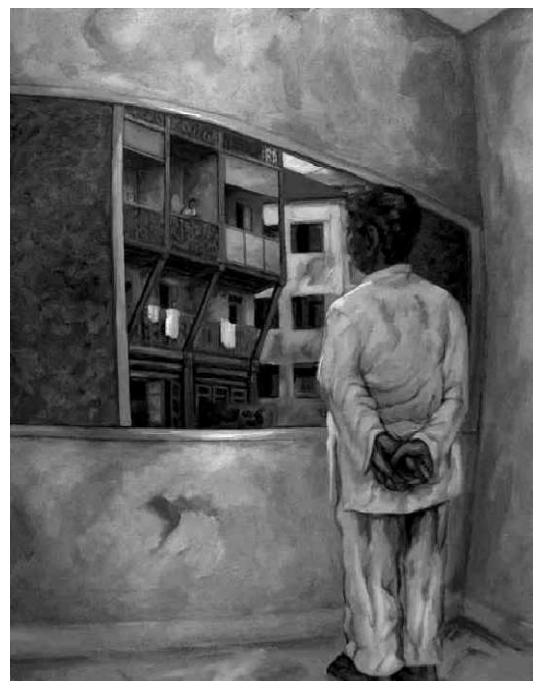




Fig. 5. 'Inside Window' by Sudhir Patwardhan, 2020

Another example of ekphrasis as performative speech is the dramatic monologue entrusted to one of the Magi, Gaspar, whose gradual realization of his mission –going to celebrate the birth of the divine child - changes him from beggar to king (there are versions of the Magi having been beggars, not kings). Dedicated to Pippa King – probably the London spiritualist drawing on the intermedial aesthetics of the surreal to help her disciples heal their traumas and realize the divine wholeness in themselves -, "Gaspar's Dream" is a dramatic monologue delivered by one of the three Biblical pilgrims lying in the stone of a capital of the Sainte-Lazare Cathedral at Autun (*Dream of the Magi* by Gislebertus, c 1120-30) (Fig. 6). Elected from among the three of them, Gaspar receives from the angel the news about the rise of the star that was to lead them to the birthplace. The monologue is not a revelation of character but Gaspar's spiritual awakening and transformation. In existentialist manner, thinking/ action shapes his identity. The pilgrimage to the birth of Jesus enacts his own rebirth in consciousness. He progresses from the immediacy of perception (dust or nothingness), to aesthetic signifiers (aubade of the morning, threnody of the dead sun), then to doubt (what if the star had misread the chart and was now serenading a nymph in Baghdad?) and finally to discovery of the true purpose of his journey: testifying to the birth of the Lord. The formulaic language for kingship ("I, Gaspar") is the moment of illumination, and the protagonist is horrified at the perspective of returning to his dream of dust instead of answering the call of divinity and turn into the stone (Peter, the stone) on which the church of Jesus would be built.

Metalepsis as discourse of culture: "Night Watch" by Rembrandt Van Rijn, 1642 is the source of another dramatic monologue, apparently spoken by Captain Frans Banninck Cocq commanding a group of civic militia guards (*kloveniers*) during a night tour of Amsterdam (Fig. 7). The poem is moving across the three levels of Lahiri's customary setting: the voice of a character inside the painting mentioning his canonization (as a painted representation) by the artist to whom he himself, as real person, had commanded the painting, while a third level of reality accommodates a transhistorical party associating a king from the sixth c B.C. and another king mentioned in a sixteenth century ballad from another (African) continent.



Fig. 6: *Dream of the Magi* by Gislebertus, c 1120-30 in the Cathedral of Saint-Lazare, Autun, France

The antithetical association of a potentate dreaming of riches (Croesus) and another one yielding to love for a beggar girl reads like a short circuit of role models gratifying the baroque taste for violent contrast. The painter's technique – *chiaroscuro* – is also remediated as vision through intertextual allusion: *visible darkness* the phrase used by the captain of the *kloveners* (civic guard) echoes Satan's speech on his descent to hell in Milton's poem, *Paradise Lost*, written at about the same time. This is the moment of his self-realization, an anagnorisis scene which places knowledge of experience and rebellion above paradisaal submission. Appointed to defend the city's order, the captain is on the lookout only for evil-doers. In Rembrandt's picture, the heavy, dark uniforms hiding away the bodies of desire stand out for contrast with what the disciplined militaries have suppressed: the woman with her temptations of food and drinking. The claws of the dead chicken hanging from the belt have been sublimated as the insignia of a guild proud of its social reputation and power of control. Lahiri's character impersonating the officer is contemptuous of Love – a word stranded in a single line, disconnected from the grammar of the poem, like the stranded girl in Rembrandt's painting. Love's space is marginal, confined and derogatory, shrinking into the story of a king buying the girl with a "pot of gold" and yielding to the streets' ignoble desires.



Fig. 7. *Night Watch* by Rembrandt Van Rijn, 1642

CONCLUSION

In the age of intermedial aesthetics, ekphrasis resorts to fusion of heterogeneous material rather than narrative embedding (for instance, John Keats describing the picture on the vase as if it were real and afterwards addressing it as author of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). Lahiri's poems are born from a mediatic exchange: textualization of visual art works, pictorial equivalent of words. The poet's text and the remediated object are twin-born. The autobiographical prefatory notes cast a few glimpses of light on the poet's family roots: an old residential home, hosting a painting by Raja Ravi Varma which an ancestor and art *connoisseur* had purchased or had been gifted as a dignitary, a story of conversion to Catholicism which had doomed his great uncle to extreme forms of retaliation, such as the burning of his manuscripts.. The family had been a stage for events that elsewhere filled pages of national history Debasish Lahiri's heritage means cultural refinement, thirst for knowledge of other modes of existence, an ecumenical call for forms of spirituality embraced by the whole of mankind.

The poems in *A Certain Penance of Light* may have been distilled from bookish sources, awakening echoes of cultural icons into their own texture, yet they are undoubtedly kindled by a vivid imagination that delights the reader through unexpected twists of ideas and phrase and especially through the discovery of hidden meanings behind what passed for common knowledge in the history of art.

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